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VIRTUE AND ANIMAL ETHICS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDY

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Abstract

Analysis of important components from the sciences, philosophy, and theology makes apparent that nonhuman animals require moral consideration beyond what they typically receive in Western culture. Humans are in the habit of inaccurately justifying harmful treatment of animals without any proper evaluation of ethical behavior; the current standards of morality regarding nonhuman species are insufficient. For instance, in the context of the latest scientific advancements in animal behavior and cognition, many aspects of the partition between human and animal intelligence have become ambiguous; however, the typical human mindset stubbornly maintains the notion that humans are ultimately superior, and the perceived lack of intellect of nonhuman animals (a premise that has yet to be empirically defined) is still employed as reason enough for humans to dominate these other species. Furthermore, Christian scripture emphasizes the importance of peace and consideration while simultaneously denouncing violence and viciousness; thus, a Christian theology premised on love, justice, and care for “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40) is in favor of an ethical reevaluation rather than the continuation of current animal maltreatment. Upon the examination of virtue across multiple significant fields, it is clear that a principle moral norm is ignored once extended beyond human interactions, that unwarranted cruelty is wrong. Nonetheless, the current standards of animal treatment are highly characteristic of unwarranted cruelty; humans have exploited the presence of nonhuman species to a point that is definitively unethical.

While we all, as a civilization, still have an incredible amount of work to do before we reach an ideal of human equality, many will not rest until their needs are met. However, there are those that are entirely unable to have a voice and oppose their oppressors. These beings share our world, our basic needs, and our unique abilities of perception and subjective experience yet do not share what we have defined as human rights. Animals, or more accurately, *nonhuman* animals, are not treated with the same moral consideration as are humans. While this reality is

thought of as fact rather than ethical dilemma, few have confronted animal ethics with the same severity as standard “ethics”—which involves moral behavior and interactions between humans and *only* humans. As Western civilization continues to address the marginalized and to move toward a goal of ethical treatment among humans, ignoring other species in this consideration should no longer be the customary practice for those who strive for virtue. The human *use* of nonhuman species has distorted necessity into the installation of exploitative industries that disregard those species’ status as living creatures and minimizes the gravity of unnecessary violence. The way our society has evolved requires new reflection on moral norms, which should include paying attention to the nonhuman members of our communities.

Many would argue that there is no place for theology or philosophy within the sciences, or vice versa, yet I consider these to agree in many aspects—and this is where truth lies. I will demonstrate how the fundamental traditions from religion and philosophical thought supplement new scientific findings in a complicated yet enlightening way, which I will apply to my analysis of morality as it pertains to nonhuman and human interactions.

The remainder of this paper will address how humans are in the habit of inaccurately justifying harmful treatment of animals without proper evaluation of ethical behavior, and how the current standards of morality regarding nonhuman species are insufficient. I will assess various beliefs and stances on morality and will discuss how and why these notions should be applied to all sentient creatures. Because human well-being does not rely on harmful, exploitative oppression of nonhuman animals, cruel treatment of nonhuman animals is unwarranted and must be modified. By extending the implications of virtue to all sentient beings rather than restricting them to interpersonal interactions, we can discover how an ethical relationship can be established between nonhuman and human animals. With this interdisciplinary analysis of virtuous thought, I will argue that nonhuman animals require moral consideration beyond what they typically receive, and I will explore how ethics can and *should* be extended to nonhuman animals.

Understanding Morality

What first must be asked is, Should ethics be applied to the treatment of species other than our own, and if so, how? Humans do have an instinctive tendency to first take care of themselves before anyone else, and although this may be natural, it is often taken to an extent that is unarguably immoral. As those in power face ethical dilemmas, they do not first ask, What would be the virtuous choice? but

rather, How does this benefit me? Rather than striving to love their neighbors or do the most good possible in any given situation, people desire outcomes that allow them to gain individual profits regardless of how the outcomes may affect others, especially when the others are not in direct sight.

This phenomenon is especially prominent in terms of animal ethics. Institutionalized animal violence prevails largely because it is out of sight and thus out of mind. For example, in his *Animal Liberation*, well-known Australian philosopher Peter Singer has compiled an extensive list of extremely destructive experiments performed on animals.¹ Although many people may know that research is conducted using animals in the sciences, we are incredibly unaware of the extents to which researchers go to keep the public from noticing what occurs behind closed laboratory doors. Singer explains, “It is not surprising that the public still has not the remotest idea of the extent of animal experimentation. Research facilities are usually designed so that the public sees little of the live animals that go in, or the dead ones that come out. (A standard textbook on the use of animals in experimentation advises laboratories to install an incinerator, since the sight of dozens of bodies of dead animals left out as ordinary refuse ‘will certainly not enhance the esteem with which the research center or school is held by the public’).”² Likewise, other institutions, such as the food and entertainment industries, expend effort to conceal the violence that is *characteristic* of the institutions—as well as the degree of that violence. The *unwarranted* cruelty that ensues is of a different magnitude than the cruelty that is already expected. For instance, in the book *Animal Factories*, Jim Mason and J. A. Keller have published images of what animals endure in the food industry.³ Although we know pigs, cattle, and chickens all die to be processed as food, does the public know that pregnant sows are confined until they give birth and are then immobilized until their piglets are weaned? That live chickens are carried upside-down by their feet on their way to be slaughtered? Countless appalling videos can be found with a simple Google search that shows the unabashed handling of animals before they are killed for food—for example, calves being dangerously flung into much-too-small trailers for transport to a different location.

As media becomes more available through multiple platforms, hiding such inhumane treatment is becoming more difficult; however, many refuse to acknowledge the cruelty that is so apparent—people would rather remain in the

¹ Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

² Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

³ Mason and Singer, *Animal Factories*.

dark than accept that the animal they are eating underwent horrific suffering from the moment it was born to the moment it was killed. It is unethical to consciously deny what we all can see, and additionally unethical for institutions to deliberately conceal their practices.

Christianity and Human Responsibility

A significant theme in the Bible is the request to be gentle and to avoid violence; copious verses warn of the evils that violence generates, in addition to verses that acclaim gentleness.⁴ Although these verses may be focused on interpersonal interactions, this theme is not restricted purely to humans. Christians are called to love and respect God’s creation—the entire earth—as we have a responsibility on this planet to do. Even though the Bible makes strong distinctions between the flesh of humankind and the flesh of other creatures, we are nonetheless asked to rule responsibly over the earth and its inhabitants. Importantly, this is where many fail to recognize the definitive discrepancy between having “dominion” (Genesis 1:28) and the exploitative domination of the earth and its nonhuman beings. In fact, when taken into context, God’s grant of human dominion over all else is actually a mandate for humans to care for and value all that God created, all that God declared as “good” (Genesis 1:25).

Importantly, many Christians refer to the numerous Bible passages that discuss meat eating in order to defend this practice: if God specifically expressed that animals were to be used for food, how could this be unethical? For instance, Genesis 9:3 conveys God’s declaration that “every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.” From such passages, I acknowledge that God made man to be omnivorous and that certain species may have been created for the purpose of food. Many other factors to consider are constantly overlooked, however! First is the question of necessity. In biblical times, humankind obviously had significantly less access to basic necessities such as food and clothing, and the use of animals in these aspects thus greatly contributed to human flourishing, yet current technologies and capacities allow this use to be nonessential, so should such permission by God still be used to defend the killing of animals today? More notably, we must recognize the extent to which we have taken God’s consent to use animals for human benefit. Would God

⁴ Against violence, for example: 1 Peter 3:9, 1 Timothy 3:3, Genesis 4:7, Hosea 4:2, Proverbs 3:31, Psalm 11:5, Titus 3:2, Mark 7:21–22, Matthew 5:38–39, Genesis 9:5–6, Matthew 26:52–54. Commending gentleness: Philippians 4:5, Colossians 3:12, Proverbs 15:1, Galatians 5:22–23, Leviticus 19:17–18, Galatians 6:10, Zechariah 7:9–10.

appreciate the violent murder of various species in the name of fashion and vanity? Would God approve of the shocking viciousness of animal maltreatment in the food industry?

Christians have taken biblical passages to defend unethical behavior, manipulating the text to support certain their own agendas. For instance, the discussions of slaves and masters in the Bible was commonly construed as an approval from God that slavery is a righteous institution. Animosity toward those who diverge from Christian convention, such as homosexuals, individuals of other faiths or customs, or merely Christian people of color, has been and continues to be observed. Historically, White Christian males asserted themselves to be the undisputed authority over other races, women, nonhuman animals, and the earth—over all of God’s creation. Illustrated by European colonialism, enslavement of African Americans, and established sexist ideals, it is clear that those who considered themselves to be the most concerned with biblical thought in the past were also the most oppressive.

The rhetoric employed to describe Native and African Americans was often characteristic of dehumanization; nonwhite individuals were depicted and perceived as “savages” and “animals.” This sentiment exposes the juxtaposition that because other races were viewed as animalistic, White males were the unmistakable definition of “human”; thus, notions of humanity are built upon a foundation of oppression, discrimination, and fallacious interpretations of superiority. Syl Ko addresses the connection between animality and racism in *Aphro-ism*:

As authors of the racial framework, Western white men conceived of *themselves* as the representatives of humanity. *They* were the objects of morality and law, and, not coincidentally, the subjects that *dictated how* we should think about notions such as morality, law, and justice. Their notion of “the animal”—construed under their white supremacist framework as “subhuman,” “nonhuman,” or “inhuman”—is the *conceptual vehicle for justified violence*. ... Since racism *requires* this notion of animality, since racism and race-thinking would fail to *make sense* without animality, those of us interested in resisting or combatting racism need to take seriously why the status of “the animal” is what it is.⁵

Importantly, these White Christian males did not recognize how such oppression opposed the major teachings of their own religion; Jesus’s radically compassionate teachings and actions disregarded any apparent inequalities between

⁵ Ko and Ko, *Aphro-ism*.

the people with whom he interacted. As Jesus expressed, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), and as Paul the Apostle later emphasized, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Jesus and his followers taught of the necessity of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, [and] faithfulness” (Galatians 5:22), yet the historically powerful individuals have chosen their power over the practice of these teachings. To recognize every person as equal in Christ would be a forfeit of status and power; therefore, artificial and unjustified hierarchies persevered, and still remain.

Nonetheless, the concept that is consistently emphasized throughout Christian tradition and scripture is *love*, which is directly referred to as the most important virtue to exercise. Despite this seemingly obvious element of Christianity, many have turned away from this virtuous way of thinking and behaving, and have used the Bible (among other resources) to assert certain claims that directly oppose the greatest commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37–40). An emphasis should therefore be placed on love and gentleness rather than on engineering scripture to promote harmful notions of exploitation and objectification.

Furthermore, it is important to note that many of the prominent figures of the scientific revolution (e.g., Hooke, Boyle, Bacon, Faraday, Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Pascal, Newton, Mendel) and the contemporary philosophy period (e.g., Rousseau, Locke, Descartes, Kant) considered themselves to be Christian. Their findings and teachings remain incredibly influential, as much of modern science and philosophy is rooted in these White Christian males’ revelations. Consequently, certain views of moral responsibility, superiority, and humanity itself originated purely from the privileged members of society. In contrast, Jesus gave special attention to the poor and the marginalized, as he himself was one of the marginalized—a poor Palestinian Jew living under Roman occupation, with no political power beyond that of social influence. In many instances, he denounced the evils of oppression and viciousness, and was the exemplar of virtue: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18).

In his *The Spirit of Soul Food*, author, pastor, and theology professor Christopher Carter evaluates Jesus's teachings in the context of the exploitation of human and nonhuman animals, and reveals the importance of considering all species, for those who identify as Christian as well as those interested in ethical behavior and equality between genders and ethnicities.⁶ He explains:

Our relationship with nonhuman animals should be influenced by Jesus' teaching that those who are the peacemakers will be blessed (Matthew 5:9) and his refusal to use violence to prevent his arrest (Luke 22:49–51). In the last example, Jesus shows us that human beings should not harm other living beings. Harming another being or ending another living being's life when it is unnecessary for our survival allows the logic that justifies an oppressive hierarchal relationship between one group over another to persist. In this way, the killing of nonhuman animals in general and specifically the killing of nonhuman animals for food perpetuate the logic of oppression that has justified the exploitation of non-white human beings, women, the GLBTQ community, and the environment. Thus, if we desire to eliminate oppressive hierarchal relationships, imitating Christ means that our plates and bowls should look drastically different than they may typically do.

As such, the defending of nonhuman animal exploitation on the basis of our "humanity," or our "superior" hierarchical status promotes the same reasoning implicated in oppressive and exploitative human relationships—a major source of evil and viciousness in past and current Western societies.

Accordingly, although the Bible discusses killing nonhuman animals for the purpose of food or sacrifice, there is no biblical defense for the infliction of suffering and cruelty unnecessarily. As we are created in God's image, humanity's greater status than that of other creatures does not discount those creatures' innate value and goodness, and we have a duty to respect all of God's creation. The presence of evil in this world was brought about by human misjudgment, and animals are subject to these evils just as we are—even though they are generally helpless against human-inflicted violence. The Bible stresses the importance of peace and consideration while simultaneously denouncing violence and viciousness; thus, I contend that a Christian theology premised on love, justice, and care for "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40–45) is in favor of an ethical reevaluation rather than the continuation of animal maltreatment.

⁶ Carter, *Spirit of Soul Food*.

Scientific Considerations

Anthropocentrism is defined as the notion that humankind is the central or most important element of existence, particularly in comparison to other species or entities.⁷ This is a philosophical thought that often refers to an excessive elevation of human importance and is not typically incorporated into basic human rationale. Nevertheless, most, if not all, people unquestionably rank humanity as the ultimate superior being. This reasoning has been left unexamined, largely because it seems to be factual, yet in order to avoid assumptions, we must ask what criteria are used to determine human superiority. I observe that the essential measurement is manifested in human intelligence but also implicates our physical form, religious ideologies, emotional and insightful abilities, and many other distinguishing qualities that are thought to be restricted to humans. Even though copious research has been conducted to juxtapose humans and animals, the founding thought has remained that humans are smarter and more rational than, and therefore superior to, all other species. Before discussing the ethical concerns of assuming that intelligence corresponds to supremacy, I will first address comparative research that attempts to create a division between human and nonhuman animals.

The study of animal cognition, or the study of the mental capacities of nonhuman animals, is a significant field in the behavioral sciences. Interestingly, this study falls under a category of psychology called *comparative* psychology. This indicates that research of animal intelligence is fundamentally conducted through comparison—hierarchizing the mental abilities of nonhuman animals against those of human animals—which includes a significant problem found in the origin of comparative psychology. C. Lloyd Morgan was a 19th-century British ethologist and psychologist known for constructing an experimental approach for the study of animal cognition that prevails today: Morgan’s Canon. In his *An Introduction to Comparative Psychology*, Morgan states, “In no case is an animal activity to be interpreted in terms of higher psychological processes if it can be fairly interpreted in terms of processes which stand lower in the scale of psychological evolution and development.”⁸ Basically, always assume there is a primitive explanation for an animal’s behavior; anthropomorphizing animal cognition will yield false conclusions. This basis of studying animal intelligence generates preceding biases that are left unaccounted for. If researchers begin with the expectation that higher intellectual processes are exhibited only by humans and

⁷ Boslaugh, “Anthropocentrism.”

⁸ Morgan, *Comparative Psychology*.

that their results must align with Morgan's Canon, how can they conduct fair tests? Even though the technology currently used to test brain activity (in any species) has drastically advanced, we still lack a method that can identify what animals are truly thinking. We cannot empirically discern process (mental functioning) and performance (what is observed externally) in an experimental setting. To this end, our knowledge of animal intelligence, feelings, cognition, consciousness, and the like is lacking, rendering such defenses of ultimate human superiority irrelevant.

Furthermore, the concrete neurological and cognitive differences between humans and other animals are questionable. The brain-to-body size ratio is noticeably larger in humans than in other species, and neuroscientists have uncovered many other factors that contribute to the uniqueness of human intelligence and cognition. For example, humans have approximately 11.5 billion more cortical neurons than do most other mammals, meaning that regardless of brain size, the human brain exhibits the most neuronal density of any species. Furthermore, the myelination of nerve cells in humans is much thicker than that in other animals. Myelin sheaths allow for electric impulses to be sent quickly along axons in the brain; thus, the speed at which information travels through the brain is significantly faster for humans than for other species. Although numerous qualities demonstrated by the human brain set it apart from other species, such qualities are not entirely exclusive to humans. All primates, for instance, exhibit similar-diameter myelin sheaths, and whales and elephants have only about half a billion fewer cortical neurons than do humans, which is numerically close enough to discount any resulting critical cognitive differences. Furthermore, brain size has been found to be an inappropriate measure of overall intelligence, in that certain small-brained species, such as birds and rodents, display more cognitive complexity than do larger-brained species, such as horses and cows. Ultimately, qualities of the human brain that appear to suggest human uniqueness and intellectual superiority may be additionally found in other species or may be altogether obsolete.

Other intellectual capabilities that humans possess are often incorrectly assumed to be restricted to humans. For example, humans are not the only species capable of forming social relationships, exercising complex problem-solving skills, and finding and using external tools. New animal-behavior research has uncovered that some cognitive skills are more advanced in other species than in humans, including certain memory abilities, adaptability, and flexible learning strategies. Researchers have conducted many cognitive tests in which animals outperform their human counterparts, so why do we remain certain of our complete intellectual

supremacy over animals? As Ursula Dicke and Gerard Roth of *Scientific American* state in the article “Animal Intelligence and the Evolution of the Human Mind”:

As far as we know, no dog can compose music, no dolphin can speak in rhymes, and no parrot can solve equations with two unknowns. Only humans can perform such intellectual feats, presumably because we are smarter than all other animal species—at least by our own definition of intelligence. ... The lack of an obvious structural correlate to human intellect jibes with the idea that our intelligence may not be wholly unique: studies are revealing that chimps, among various other species, possess a diversity of humanlike social and cognitive skills.⁹

As our knowledge of neuroscience advances, many aspects of a seemingly definite line between human and animal intelligence continue to become blurred.

Importantly, intelligence continues to serve as the major measurement for one’s ranking within a dominance hierarchy, defined in animal behavior as “a form of animal social structure in which a linear or nearly linear ranking exists, with each animal dominant over those below it and submissive to those above it in the hierarchy.”¹⁰ This phenomenon is not restricted to nonhuman animal behavior but is also an innate factor of sociability. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s revolutionary work *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* acknowledges that social living introduces artificial inequalities.¹¹ He addresses a form of self-love that is unnatural and hierarchical: *amour-propre*. This essentially refers to one’s desire to be “better” than others, the desire to be ranked higher in the established social order. As a result, inequalities are developed concerning whom can be used to what purpose and how valuable their contribution is in the wider community. Rousseau explains, “Here are all natural qualities set in action, every man’s rank and fate set, not only as to the amount of their goods and the power to help or to hurt, but also as to mind, beauty, strength or skill, as to merit or talents, and, since these are the only qualities that could attract consideration, one soon had to have or to affect them; for one’s own advantage one had to seem other than one in fact was.” Because of the inflation of comparative thinking that arises from sociability, Rousseau recognizes man in society as an unfree being that only finds meaning in this relational self-love, *amour-propre*.

⁹ Dicke and Roth, “Animal Intelligence.”

¹⁰ Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Dominance Hierarchy.”

¹¹ Rousseau and Gourevitch, *Discourses*.

We must acknowledge the consequences of the inclination to hierarchize on the basis of intelligence. Today, the theory of prominent philosopher Aristotle regarding “natural slaves,” or individuals born lacking certain intellectual qualities, is widely discredited. In Book I of his *Politics*, Aristotle argues, “For he is a slave by nature who is capable of belonging to another—which is also why he belongs to another—and who participates in reason only to the extent of perceiving it, but does not have it.”¹² Furthermore, Thomas Aquinas held a similar view, as stated in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*: “For men of outstanding intelligence naturally take command, while those who are less intelligent but of more robust physique, seem intended by nature to act as servants.”¹³

To be sure, it was not uncommon for past figures to defend the institution of slavery with the argument that “natural slaves” are revealed through certain intellectual weaknesses and that such weaknesses can be compensated for by their submission to other, smarter, people. This argument was not restricted to Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s generations and has been utilized by more recent figures. American psychologist and author Arthur Jensen, who taught at the University of California, Berkeley, and died in 2012, conducted numerous studies regarding racial differences in intelligence. In his book *The g Factor: The Science of Mental Ability*, Jensen discusses variability in the g factor, or the general intelligence factor, among White and African American individuals: “The relationship of the g factor to a number of biological variables and its relationship to the size of the white-black differences on various cognitive tests (i.e., Spearman’s hypothesis) suggests that the average white-black difference in g has a biological component. ... Racial populations differ in many genetic characteristics, some of which, such as brain size, have behavioral and psychometric correlates, particularly g.”¹⁴ Jensen published numerous works claiming that some races are inherently more intelligent than others, which have been determined to be malicious and incorrect. Indeed, the general academic population recognizes comparable oppressive works to be condemnable, yet intelligence (along with wealth and other artificial values that result from intelligence) still evidently determines the worth of both human and nonhuman animals alike.

Although we can clearly note the ethical violations present in such works and mentalities, using scientific studies pertaining to intelligence to advocate for the ranking of worth among species remains incredibly prevalent. Peter Singer

¹² Clayton, “Aristotle: Politics.”

¹³ Aquinas, *Contra Gentiles*.

¹⁴ Jensen, *The g Factor*.

articulates this correlation in his *Animal Liberation*: “ ‘Speciesism,’ by analogy with racism, must also be condemned. ... If possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his or her own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose?” Regardless of humanity’s accepted higher degree of intelligence, intellect does not correspond to freedom or amount of moral consideration due. Furthermore, in reference to scientific *fact*, we know that animals have the abilities to be scared, to feel pain, and to protect their kin. In other words, humans are aware that animals are capable of feeling and thus of suffering.

It is important to note Jeremy Bentham’s acknowledgment of such reality:

The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the *os sacrum* are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or perhaps the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day or a week or even a month, old. But suppose they were otherwise, what would it avail? The question is not, Can they *reason*? nor Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?”¹⁵

The ethical weight of a being’s capacity for suffering is much greater than the weight of a being’s level of intelligence, yet we still employ nonhuman animals’ lack of intelligence (a premise that has yet to be empirically defined) as reason enough to harmfully exploit other species.

Human Morality

This paper serves as a confrontation of the negligible moral norms applied to nonhuman animals. While there is no complete, explicit definition of morality, the most agreed-upon theories from philosophers throughout history have emphasized that vicious, harmful, unnecessarily cruel acts are unethical. Such acts can be measured by the degree or amount of suffering they produce, and, as articulated by C. S. Lewis in his anti-vivisection argument, “whenever pain is inflicted it requires justification.”¹⁶ (Importantly, vivisection is defined as “the

¹⁵ Bentham and Mill, *The Utilitarians*.

¹⁶ Lewis and Walmsley, C.S. Lewis Essay Collection.

cutting of or operation on a living animal usually for physiological or pathological investigation” or, broadly, “animal experimentation especially if considered to cause distress to the subject.”¹⁷) Accordingly, there is a difference between quickly killing livestock for the purpose of food—the death can happen in an instant and the suffering is quickly over—and the inhumane treatment of animals from the moment they are born to the moment they are relieved of the harsh, agonizing lives they have been subject to by the hand of “moral” agents.

In addition to intelligence, morality itself has been referred to as yet another element of humanity that separates us from other animals. Presumably, humans are the only beings who are aware of morality and are moral agents—defined as people capable of distinguishing right from wrong, or morally responsible or blameworthy, for behaving immorally.¹⁸ Immanuel Kant developed Kantian ethics, in which moral agents have a duty to act in accordance with moral law. Specifically, he writes, “An action done from duty has its moral worth, not in the purpose to be attained by it, but in the maxim according with which it is decided upon; it depends therefore, not on the realization of the object of action, but solely on the principle of volition in accordance with which, irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire, the action has been performed.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Kant contends that moral agents must be rational, autonomous beings: “The will is conceived as a faculty of determining oneself to action in accordance with the conception of certain laws. And such a faculty can be found only in rational beings.”²⁰ Notwithstanding our total uncertainty regarding whether nonhuman animals (or even human animals, for that matter) have free will, virtue ethics predominately concludes that humans have a certain moral responsibility to choose to do what is virtuous and to refuse the adverse, immoral choice. As Aristotle conveys in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, “Virtue lies in our power, and similarly so does vice; because where it is in our power to act, it is also in our power not to act.”²¹ To this end, do we, as moral agents, choose to behave ethically in our treatment of animals? Likewise, do we exercise our autonomous abilities and knowledge of morality to refuse unethical treatment of animals? As Peter Singer identifies:

We rarely stop to consider that the animal who kills with the least reason to do so is the human animal. We think of lions and wolves as savage because

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

¹⁸ Rosen, “Responsibility and Moral Ignorance.”

¹⁹ Guyer, Kant’s Groundwork.

²⁰ Kant and Abbott, *Fundamental Principles*.

²¹ Welldon, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

they kill; but they must kill, or starve. Humans kill other animals for sport, to satisfy their curiosity, to beautify their bodies, and to please their palates. Human beings also kill members of their own species for greed or power. Moreover, human beings are not content with mere killing. Throughout history they have shown a tendency to torment and torture both their fellow human beings and their fellow animals before putting them to death. No other animal shows much interest in doing this.²²

Sadly, the moral implications of human treatment of nonhuman animals are consistently avoided; many would rather ignore these truths than consider ethical treatment of animals.

In terms of human morality, there is a common psychological disconnect in which we perceive our overall character to be good, regardless of our individual actions. Few people evaluate their sins or unethical behavior and decide, "I often behave immorally, so I must be a bad person." I believe this disconnect to be a consequence of guilt, which is defined in psychology as "a self-conscious emotion characterized by a painful appraisal of having done (or thought) something that is wrong and often by a readiness to take action designed to undo or mitigate this wrong"²³; however, likely because animals cannot outwardly express their pain and suffering in the same way humans can, the dimension of guilt that encompasses wanting to "undo or mitigate this wrong" is not experienced in the majority of humans. Interestingly, it is important to consider whether, if animals acquired the ability to speak, we would still treat them as we do. Is the fact that animals cannot directly exclaim, "I am in pain!" the determining factor that supports the continuation of human-inflicted violence? Although verbal language is a critical feature of human uniqueness, we know that animals experience pain as we do; in fact, much of what we know regarding the somatosensory responses to painful stimulation was obtained from (painful) research conducted on animals! Because guilt is an uncomfortable feeling, and because animals cannot demand their own liberation as humans can, their unprovoked suffering therefore remains acceptable.

Likewise, when animal ethics is addressed, opposition is a typical response. For instance, Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, a significant resource in the deliberation of animal ethics, received widespread objection after its publication. Animal ethics, in itself, is rarely considered as a valid discipline by those in power, at the top of the socially constructed dominance hierarchy, those historically

²² Singer, *Animal Liberation*.

²³ VandenBos, *Dictionary of Psychology*.

oppressive individuals. Arguments against the moral consideration of animals are manifested in animals' assumed irrationality, lack of moral perspective, and lack of free will. For example, philosophy professor Tibor Machan contends in his work *Putting Humans First: Why We Are Nature's Favorite*:

So far, there is no clear evidence that any species other than human beings reside at the top of the natural hierarchy. When human beings emerge in the natural world, so does the capacity to think and exercise self-initiative. That is why Aristotle calls us 'the rational animal'. ... Animals, furthermore, have no central, crucial need of thinking, whereas human beings cannot begin to survive without thinking. And unlike animals, human beings cannot count on instincts to guide them automatically. For those lower animals that do exhibit some rudimentary cognitive capacity, it is very much a side issue, elicited usually by human beings in highly circumscribed and unusual circumstances (such as laboratories).²⁴

As such, critics of animal ethics habitually establish their reasoning in humanity's superiority: because we exhibit rationality, morality, and autonomy, we are to be ethically considered as distinct from nonhuman animals.

Conversely, the assertion that human beings are the only beings that exhibit rationality is not factual, as we do not have evidence that confirms nonhuman animals to be definitively irrational. Moreover, by characterizing the human species as rational, we dismiss the entirely *irrational* behaviors and attitudes that humans exhibit. In an interview with the American Psychological Association's Kirsten Weir, psychologist and behavioral economist Dan Ariely discussed human irrationality and dishonesty, explaining, "Classical economics assumes human beings behave rationally. But if you believe everyone is rational, and you look at humanity and see how much misery there is in the world, then you have to conclude that this is the best we can do ... the world isn't like this as an outcome of the decisions of eight billion rational people. It's like this as the outcome of eight billion irrational people."²⁵ Arguably, humans are the only species that knowingly and unnecessarily harm themselves and others without true reason.

Furthermore, in acknowledgment of the significant vices of the human species, we must note the driving forces of many of our actions: greed, gluttony, arrogance, and apathy. In *Environmental Virtue Ethics*, Philip Cafaro speaks of these vices and of how humanity's submission to these vices opposes reason and

²⁴ Machan, *Putting Humans First*.

²⁵ Weir, "Totally Irrational."

actually harms the entire planet. In reference to traditional philosophical thought, Cafaro writes,

The tradition sees vice as contradicting and eventually undermining reason, hence destroying our ability to understand our proper place in the world and act morally. Aristotle expresses this in his distinction between incontinence (the tendency to pursue pleasure even when we know it is wrong to do so) and the full-blown vice of intemperance (where the continued pursuit of illicit pleasure has so clouded our judgement that we no longer recognize right from wrong). The vices are habits of thought and action. Left unchecked, they tend to cloud reason, the voice of both conscience and prudence.²⁶

Regarding humanity's continual destruction of the planet, he later exposes our refusal to accept that in harming the planet, we are likewise harming ourselves: "We falsely assume that we can keep separate harms to nature and harms to humanity, harms to others and harms to ourselves. We do not see that environmental vices do not just harm nature; they harm us and the people around us." Driven by greed and selfishness, those in power often succumb to vices and irrational behaviors that directly cause universal damage: harm to our planet, to nonhuman animals, and to humanity. In claiming that humans are the only rational, moral creatures, we also must admit that we are irrational and immoral, as our knowledge of virtue requires our *immoral* actions to be the *choice* to act immorally rather than virtuously. The aspiration for improvement within our species must be accompanied by a conscious decision to choose virtue over vice; otherwise, our immoral presence on the earth will continue to cause destruction.

Virtuous Treatment of Nonhuman Animals

Again, I contend that sentient beings do require moral consideration *beyond* what they are currently given. No number of discrepancies that permit the human species to govern the rest of the world's inhabitants can excuse the institutionalized abuse of nonhuman—but still thinking, feeling, *valuable*—beings. In fact, these very discrepancies bestow on us the moral responsibility to consider improvements, to strive for virtue in the treatment of all beings.

Indeed, certain consequences occur when virtuous thought is applied to the treatment of nonhuman animals. Practices that have become traditions are threatened, and an overall human mentality is put into question. Nonetheless, the

²⁶ Sandler and Cafaro, *Environmental Virtue Ethics*.

progressions of Western culture have historically yielded beneficial outcomes, and an acceptance of ethical treatment of animals should be viewed as another triumph over oppressive attitudes. Similar to the abolitionist movement or the feminist movement, animal liberation shares an end of challenging oppression, objectification, and exploitation. Moreover, we must acknowledge what is actually at stake in the moral consideration of other beings. Are the majority unwilling to sacrifice their ability to eat animal meat? Will scientific research be hindered by the moral consideration of animals? Does animal ethics minimize the value of humanity? No, the application of moral norms to nonhuman species does not require the use of nonhuman species to be entirely eliminated and does not imply that they are equal to humans. Instead, in terms of nonhuman and human animal relations, we should be asking, How can we reshape our current standards of animal treatment virtuously? When and how is the exploitation of animals justified? What constitutes ethical treatment? Rather than being viewed as a threat to human flourishing, it should be perceived as another way in which we each can exercise virtue.

Virtue ethics encompasses a purpose of cultivating virtuous habits in order to identify how one can grow and become a better person. Ethicists emphasize that consistency is an essential component of morality; one's ethical reasoning must be reliable in all of one's decision-making. When one alters one's ethics case by case, one is not practicing virtue but instead allowing oneself to behave in any way that is of direct benefit to oneself. As emphasized by Kant's categorical imperative "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law,"²⁷ sinful acts, even those that appear to be harmless, are nonetheless sinful. By this reasoning, purchasing animal meat is an action that supports the institutionalized cruel treatment of animals, and while it may be an indirect method of support that *appears* to be harmless, consumers of animal meat are the *direct* cause of animal slaughter. In practice, discern where and how the "meat" you buy lived; was it factory-farmed or truly pasture-raised? Are your eggs actually free-range, or do they merely adhere to the weak standards set by the USDA? If vegetarianism or veganism is not a practical lifestyle for monetary, dietary, or other personal restrictions, spending a few extra dollars and minutes of research to practice more-ethical meat consumption can be a great contribution toward fostering virtuous treatment of nonhuman animals. The cascade of events that follows consumer habits works fast, and even individual practices slowly but surely will alter the destructive principles of the Western food industry. In

²⁷ Guyer, Kant's Groundwork.

conclusion, individuals who strive to take moral actions must employ their ethics consistently and must consider the ways in which their actions harm nonhuman beings *in addition to* human beings.

Conclusion

In consideration of the recent breakthroughs in such areas as modern science, technology, and communications, the Western mindset commonly reasons that the current status of humankind is superior to that of past generations. There is an unrecognized yet prevalent bias toward modern times that increases alongside such advancements, especially within the younger generations of people. Many traditions of the past are becoming outdated, and younger individuals are frequently drawn to breaking the old status quo in favor of, hopefully, progressive outlooks and acceptance.

I recognize the importance of an ethical reflection in terms of our relationship with other species. Do we want to be the generation of people that puts an end to the unnecessary human-inflicted animal violence? Or do we want this singular aspect of modern life to remain unchanged and unevaluated from a moral perspective?

I suggest that we use virtue ethics to discern appropriate treatment of animals because certain institutionalized evils are completely unnecessary yet are customary because the vast majority of people do not directly experience this violence. In biblical times, people had a different relationship with the animals they killed for food, clothing, and sacrifice. They raised their own flocks and killed them with their own hands, and this was done under God's instructions ("you may slaughter animals from the herds and flocks the Lord has given you, as I have commanded you" [Deuteronomy 12:21]), in the kosher way that involves using a knife to sever the trachea and esophagus—the quickest and most painless method, in which the animal does not endure much suffering at the time of its death.²⁸ Now, however, animals intended to be meat suffer their entire lives and are not known to their consumers as living beings but are always and exclusively considered meat. Even though many would argue that they disagree with the institutionalized mistreatment of animals, they are under the illusion that change is not within their power. People therefore continue to purchase what is at their fingertips—an already dead animal that they cannot do anything to save. Of course, true change will not happen instantaneously, but the importance of determination for a greater purpose

²⁸ Kesselman, Guide to the Law.

is essential for humanity's moral growth. Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged this in a speech at New York University in 1961: "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. ... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."²⁹ Clearly, his cause for justice and equality among human individuals requires much more sacrifice, suffering, and struggle than a new consideration of ethical animal treatment will require.

Humans' demonstrable superiority in our *capacity* to affect the conditions in our world does not imply a superiority in the intrinsic *value* of human lives. That we exhibit certain uniqueness in our intellectual capabilities does not grant us clearance to discount other lives as insignificant. The infliction of suffering on the basis of superiority is not an ethically sound notion but is a submission to oppressive ideals that have historically plagued our civilization. Western societies do not rely on the exploitation of animals to flourish, and thus, the unjustified violence that ensues is entirely immoral. We are the cause of animals' suffering, but to what end? What benefits do we achieve that outweigh the degree of suffering that animals are subject to?

Because the current intentions of animal killing are fixed in profit rather than necessity, however, and because the majority of humans have disconnected themselves from the consequences of this violence, practices characteristic of unwarranted cruelty to nonhuman animals continues and the immoral practices are not widely opposed. Those who have directly resisted the unethical treatment of animals are not given sufficient attention, because most people would rather avoid this reality than admit that major customs, and their own behaviors, are wrong. Biblical defenses of animal killing have become significantly obsolete in industrialized countries, yet the central principles of Christian theology—love, justice, compassion, gentleness—are as necessary to embrace as ever. It is essential to make an effort in cultivating habits that produce virtue rather than evil in this time when each action affects so many others around us, both human and nonhuman. We must seek to end the alienation of animals in our culture, in order to resist the vices that such alienation continues to generate.

The maltreatment of animals perpetuates the same logic that was, and still is, used to justify the mistreatment of human beings—which is unmistakable in the factory farming industry. Significantly, the employees of these establishments are typically people of color and are typically treated as less than human. Charlie

²⁹ "Realizing a Dream."

LeDuff reports on these inhumane occurrences in his *New York Times* article “At a Slaughterhouse, Some Things Never Die.”³⁰ LeDuff conveys the terrible working conditions that the immigrant, marginalized, and desperate workers undergo; as one worker is quoted as saying, “This job’s for an ass. They treat you like an animal.” The factory farming industry outwardly seeks out those in need; it prevails in its violence by pursuing those who feel stuck in marginalized positions. LeDuff explains that in the slaughterhouse, “the turnover is 100 percent. Five thousand quit and five thousand are hired every year. You hear people say, They don’t kill pigs in the plant, they kill people. So desperate is the company for workers, its recruiters comb the streets of New York’s immigrant communities, personnel staff members say, and word of mouth has reached Mexico and beyond. The company even procures criminals. Several at the morning orientation were inmates on work release in green uniforms, bused in from the county prison.” Clearly, this institution as a whole not only propagates violence toward animals but also engages in the dehumanization and inhumane treatment of human beings. In contemplating our civilization’s capacity for virtue, we must acknowledge that this major industry is an immoral industry.

Furthermore, the routine acts of violence in the agriculture industry not only include immoral treatment of the animals but are also psychologically damaging to the associated employees. James McWilliams, history professor and author of *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly*, writes about this phenomenon in his article “The Dangerous Psychology of Factory Farming.”³¹ He evaluates the current practice of killing animals for food in comparison to how this practice was conducted in the past: “Before 1850, when most animal husbandry happened on a relatively small scale, farmers viewed their animals as animals. That is, they saw them as sentient beings with unique needs that, left unaddressed, would result in an inferior product.” The post-1850 mindset that emphasizes profitability above all else in the animal agriculture system dismisses the acknowledgment of the animals as animals, viewing them instead as lucrative objects. Of this, McWilliams reports,

Beginning with plants, and then moving to animals, they became less concerned with individual idiosyncrasies and more concerned with collective evaluations of productivity. The chain of production expanded, and, as it did, farmers came to speak in terms of nutrient input, breeding schedules, confinement space, and disease management. By the 1870s,

³⁰ LeDuff, “At a Slaughterhouse.”

³¹ McWilliams, “Dangerous Psychology.”

farmers were regularly referring to their animals not as animals but, literally, as machines being built in factories. ... [Factory farming's] impersonal, highly rationalized structure is designed to protect those involved from the emotional consequences of killing.³²

Because of the objectification of animals in the agriculture industry, farmers do not have to face the reality of animal slaughter but can train their minds to recognize living beings as objects, machines, and revenues. This notion alone reveals the extent to which humans avoid ethical treatment of animals. That factory farmers knowingly have to objectify and demoralize the animals they slaughter in order to preserve their own mental well-being exposes that this industry promotes the cultivation of evil rather than virtue, disregarding both the factory farmers themselves and the animals they work with.

In accordance with theological and philosophical thought, the ethical treatment of animals must entail practicing consistently distinguished virtues. In particular, Plato and Aristotle emphasized prudence, courage, temperance, and justice as the four cardinal virtues. Rousseau identified pity, or compassion, as the essence of human morality. Jeremy Bentham taught of the weighing of pains against pleasures, and Kant explained how to exercise goodwill in his categorical imperative. Among these past philosophers, as among many other virtue ethicists, the concept of morality is defined in multiple ways, yet none of these methods of exercising virtue is sufficiently applied to the treatment of animals. Furthermore, Christian ethics maintains that Jesus is the embodiment of righteousness and is the ultimate role model for humanity, and that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are fundamental characteristics. As Philippians 4:8–9 states, “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” It is not difficult to see that our consideration of nonhuman animals does not align with any of these virtues or methods of practicing virtue. We must therefore reflect upon our moral obligations to nonhuman beings and discontinue the institutionalized, unjustified animal violence that hinders our society’s capacity for virtue.

Virtuous behavior toward nonhuman animals would entail a complete reconsideration and elimination of the unwarranted institutionalized cruelty and violence involved in the exploitation of other species. In refusing the oppression of animals, we are refusing this major vice that has historically harmed the human

³² McWilliams, “Dangerous Psychology.”

members of our communities, just as it continues to harm the nonhuman members. Those who care about exercising virtue or imitating Christ in their lives should confront the immorality that accompanies the exploitative oppression of animals and should subsequently consider changing their diets to reflect their priorities. Because virtue is an *action*, we must be active in our practice and recognition of virtue—active in our moral consideration of both human and nonhuman beings.

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